The Dinner Party by Mona Gardner (1942)

The country is India. A large dinner party is being given in an up-country station by a colonial official and his wife. The guests are army officers and government attachés and their wives, and an American naturalist.

At one side of the long table a spirited discussion springs up between a young girl and a colonel. The girl insists women have long outgrown the jumping-on-a-chair-at-the-sight-of-a-mouse era, that they are not as fluttery as their grandmothers. The colonel says they are, explaining women haven't the actual nerve control of men. The other men at the table agree with him.

"A woman's unfailing reaction in any crisis," the colonel says, "is to scream. And while a man may feel like it, yet he has that ounce more of control than a woman has. And that last ounce is what counts."

The American scientist does not join in the argument but sits and watches the faces of the other guests. As he looks, he sees a strange expression come over the face of the hostess. She is staring straight ahead, the muscles of her face contracting slightly. With a small gesture she summons the native boy standing behind her chair. She whispers to him. The boy's eyes widen: he turns quickly and leaves the room. No one else sees this, nor the boy when he puts a bowl of milk on the verandah outside the glass doors.

The American comes to with a start. In India, milk in a bowl means only one thing. It is bait for a snake. He realizes there is a cobra in the room.

He looks up at the rafters - the likeliest place - and sees they are bare. Three corners of the room, which he can see by shifting only slightly, are empty. In the fourth corner a group of servants stand, waiting until the next course can be served. The American realizes there is only one place left - under the table.

His first impulse is to jump back and warn the others. But he knows the commotion will frighten the cobra and it will strike. He speaks quickly, the quality of his voice so arresting that it sobers everyone.

"I want to know just what control everyone at this table has. I will count three hundred - that's five minutes - and not one of you is to move a single muscle. The persons who move will forfeit 50 rupees. Now! Ready!"

The 20 people sit like stone images while he counts. He is saying ". . . two hundred and eighty . . ." when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the cobra emerge and make for the bowl of milk. Four or five screams ring out as he jumps to slam shut the verandah doors.

"You certainly were right, Colonel!" the host says. "A man has just shown us an example of real control."

"Just a minute," the American says, turning to his hostess, "there's one thing I'd like to know. Mrs. Wynnes, how did you know that cobra was in the room?"

A faint smile lights up the woman's face as she replies. "Because it was lying across my foot."

Comprehension Questions
Answer on a separate sheet of paper. Point-form is acceptable.

1. How did the hostess and the American deal with the conflict presented by the cobra?
2. Explain the argument that happens between the colonel and the young woman.
3. What words can you use to describe the hostess and the American? You can make a table if you want to separate their characteristics.
4. What does the hostess reveal at the end? Explain what kind of **irony** is shown at this point in the story.
5. What is the main **conflict** of the story? Use evidence from the text to support your reasoning.
6. Why does the American make everyone sit still without telling them why?